

Fundamental Muck
McLean Edwards – *No Immunity*, 2011
Words: Erik Jensen

McLean Edwards understands comedy. He tells long jokes and paints what appear to be short ones. Like much good humour, they are brutal on the surface – painted visions of Mel Brooks’ death in an open sewer. And yet in comedy – to take the Brooks gag at face value – Edwards never loses sight of the tragedy that is cutting one’s own finger. The great strength of his work comes from the wounded empathy at the heart of each painting – the friendly mocking and hurt anxiety that has its basis in the fact he has never really painted anyone but himself.

“Buffoonery is a great word,” Edwards says. “But these paintings are also malicious. They are malicious portraits. There’s a jaded hilarity – I distrust confidence and I think my paintings reflect that.”

These are painters’ jokes. In conversation it is not unusual for Edwards to quote, unattributed, from the work of Richard Prince. He gets off on tricks of perspective. In remembering always to show his hand, Edwards delights in what painting can say about the fabrications from which society is built.

The visual gag in ‘Little Creatures’ (2011) is a case in point. A man dressed as Santa Claus is painted with a beard of shaving cream, surrounded by a phalanx of other impersonators. As if mocking the subtlety of his own joke, the figure nicks himself with a razor. Edwards paints exclusively from memory but maintains memory is a lie. “I’m just taking that lie one step further,” he says. “We all know Santa is a hoax but we go along with it because it’s a major celebration in our culture. And it’s all a fabrication. For kids.” If Edwards has a contemporary, it is in the American painter George Condo. His ‘The Stockbroker’ (2002) might as well be a McLean – impotent figures with erect necks and soft-toy faces; pantless, pathetic, holding a doll more human than themselves.

Condo and Edwards are involved in the fundamental muck of painting. They are not trying to fix images to the surface. They are summoning them up out of the canvas – the “fake old masters,” as Condo calls them, latent in the very act of painting.

In 1996, Condo began calling these figures “antipodal beings” – a phrase lifted from Aldous Huxley’s 1956 essay on perception, ‘Heaven and Hell’. But the great difference between the two painters is that while Condo visits these warping forms in the antipodes of the mind, Edwards lives there.

Huxley has in his essay the notion of a collector of specimens that followed in time the shaman but preceded the zoologist – a rudimentary kind of scientist whose primary concern was the making of a census, catching and killing and stuffing as many creatures as he could. At the time of writing, it should be noted, Huxley was still awed by the experiences of mescaline and hypnosis.

“Like the earth of a hundred years ago, our mind still has its darkest Africas, its unmapped Borneos and Amazonian basins,” he wrote. “In relation to the fauna of these regions we are not yet zoologists, we are mere naturalists and collectors of specimens. The fact is unfortunate; but we have to accept it, we have to make the best of it. However lowly, the work of the collector must be done, before we can proceed to the higher scientific tasks of classification, analysis, experiment, and theory making.” Huxley describes the creatures of this mental region living in complete independence, but with a strangeness dictated by patterns known to those who can venture into this domain with regularity.

“Like the giraffe and the duck-billed platypus, the creatures inhabiting these remoter regions of the mind are exceedingly improbable,” he writes. “Nevertheless they exist, they are facts of observation; and as such, they cannot be ignored by anyone who is honestly trying to understand the world in which he lives.”

It is not too clumsy a leap to recognise in these creatures the figures of Edwards’ paintings. He has, more than any artist working in Australia, spent his career relentlessly painting his own psyche. Even his sitters – Cate Blanchett among them – have made this point.

Edwards is at his best when he is painting his flaws. And these flaws are Shakespearean. The resolved picture, for Edwards, is a sign of laziness – a canvas where he has not truly struggled with the act of painting.

These flaws are the strength of a picture like ‘Bound’ (2011). The obvious reference is William Dobell’s 1943 portrait of Joshua Smith, for which he won the Archibald Prize and a subsequent court case. But the monolithic figure and tracts of sketched in landscape are closer in vision to the crass brilliance of Max Ernst’s ‘The Elephant Celebes’ (1921). There is a compulsion not towards caricature but towards simply finishing the canvas. This is not a dream; it is a mental state. “The Max Ernst thing,” Edwards says, dismissing it. “If you mention it I want you to mention I’m almost as dilettantic. Of course, I dip in and out. The shift between vulgarity and the sublime is very difficult, but it is there.”

The first time I properly understood Edwards’ painting was in the front room of a mutual friend’s house, where an early McLean hangs on one wall. It shows a male figure cradling a child – a reference to the Pieta, a pictorial task Edwards had set himself. There is angered pentimenti in the line of the arm, which has been reworked several times. But by the time this difficulty of posture has been resolved, the face of the child has been left to a few bent lines – the fundamental challenge had been dealt with, and the rest of the canvas no longer interested him. The act was brash and exciting and suddenly over. “People don’t talk about the architecture of painting enough,” Edwards says when we meet to discuss this. “I realise some of my pictures are like buildings with the scaffolding still on. But there are not enough people out there who leave the stuff in that actually makes something a painting.”

Talking about the work, Edwards prefers literary references to painterly ones. He is a voracious reader – the autodidactic son of a journalist and diplomat, who with some effort had himself thrown out of art school and spent the rest of his life hunting an education in books and catalogues.

“My work’s like reading a book with the chapters all jumbled up, but it’s still a book,” he says. “They’re an alter-ego that has more relationship with authorship. It’s a little Philip Roth. There’s autobiographical intent but it’s not naturalistic. It’s Philip Roth with a sense of humour.”

The jumble is deliberate and unavoidable. Edwards’ thinking is not straightforward. You can see, particularly in his earlier canvases, James Ensor’s sense of chaos and carnival – his love, too, of the mask as a means to embolden and to ridicule.

In Ensor’s epic masterpiece, ‘Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889’ (1888), the 28-year-old painted himself as the son of God. But the figure’s mocking self-parody was not truly clear until it had been rejected from exhibition and could be seen hanging above that most absurd of instruments – the harmonium – in a room of Ensor’s Ostend home. It is evident in a fabulous 1933 photograph by Maurice Antony, being played to amid a folly of propped-up pictures and over-stuffed settees.

I put this to Edwards and the thought causes him to dig around in a pile of magazines, looking for a Martin Kippenberger review that mentions the German artist’s “corrosive self-parody” but has precisely nothing to do with Edwards’ painting. “I’m not,” he says, “some fucking Belgian tailor’s son.” (And nor was Ensor, whose father was a Brussels-born engineer, but this seems to matter little.)

At times Edwards’ studio can feel like a hall of mirrors. His apartment in the inner-Sydney suburb of Chippendale builds up periodically with portraits of the artist in various stages of cross-dress and familiarity. When he paints, Edwards is not just pursuing himself; he is inventing himself. “Kangaroos and wallabies may lack verisimilitude,” Huxley wrote, “but their improbability repeats itself and obeys recognisable laws.” Painting has become, for Edwards, a way of marshalling experience. He keeps a diary but makes up so much of what is in it that the exercise itself is essentially pointless. “Self-conscious endeavours are frowned upon,” he says by way of explanation. “But what could be more self-conscious than painting a picture? I probably use it as a cathartic exercise but I would reject the therapy tag. These are not easy things to do.”

The pictures in ‘No Immunity’ seemed to come quickly to Edwards’ studio. They have the same sense of urgency obvious in his best work – images that are produced out of a compulsion that renders him unable to do anything else. At times, they seem like pages from his invented diary. At times, plates from an István Hárđi study. “There is no broader intention than the compulsion to make things,” he says. “I’m one of those guys who does it because he can’t not do it.”